

SOCIOLOGY

A BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH

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Preface

This book is designed to serve as a textbook for introductory sociology courses in undergraduate colleges. We hope that it is readable enough to be of interest also to some who are not enrolled in such courses.

Sociology textbooks have multiplied like the sands of the sea. It makes sense, therefore, to indicate here the major characteristics of our book.

We have given the book the subtitle "A Biographical Approach." What we mean by this is that we have organized the material, as far as possible, in a sequence that corresponds to the stages of social experience in the biography of individuals. We think that this is more helpful to the beginning student than the usual organization of material in terms of a sociologist's preconceived notions about the structures of society. Clearly, this biographical organization could not be applied mechanically all through the book. While it dictated that the family would be discussed early in the book and old age toward the end, it is debatable whether, say, the discussion of power should precede or succeed that of deviance. Nor does this matter. What we have tried to do with the biographical organization, as well as with the entire presentation, is to consistently relate the analysis of large institutional structures to the concrete, everyday experience of individuals as they live their lives in society.

Throughout the book, we have emphasized concepts and basic perspectives rather than the presentation of data. The accumulation of data in most areas of sociology is enormous and growing at a rapid pace. To give an overview of this vast mass of information in an introductory course is not only very difficult but, we think, defeats the purpose of such a course. It seems to us that this purpose ought to be the

communication of an underlying sociological perspective, of an understanding of how sociology essentially goes about its business. If the student has acquired a basic "kit" of concepts, he can subsequently apply this himself to whatever data may come to his attention - whether in other courses, in his reading or, for that matter, in his own social experience. Naturally it has been necessary to introduce data of all descriptions, but this was always done with the aforementioned purpose in mind. For example, when we have presented data on the American class system, this was not done in order to give a comprehensive panorama of everything sociologists have to say about this subject, but rather to illustrate how sociologists go about their business in this particular area of social life.

It may be said, then, that our approach emphasizes "theory" in sociology, in the sense of the conceptual architecture by which sociologists try to make sense of their findings. We have not, however, dealt with theory in a separate chapter. We have felt that, in an introductory text, it was better to introduce all theoretical problems in immediate connection with sociologists' efforts to interpret actual social experience. It is customary in most undergraduate curricula to confront students first with the concrete empirical applications of sociology, and only later (often in an advanced course for majors) with the various traditions of sociological theory. We agree with this procedure in terms of course sequences, but this is no reason for avoiding the theoretical approach in the introductory course itself.

Most of the data we have introduced are about contemporary American society. This "ethnocentrism" is methodological rather than ideological. We are certainly not suggesting that American society is the only important one to look at, or that sociology cannot or has not dealt effectively with other

societies. Rather, we felt that, for American students, data about their own society would more effectively illustrate the sociological approach in general than data about unfamiliar or even exotic societies. We recognize that this is an arguable pedagogical position, but, be this as it may, this is the direction we have taken in this book.

We have felt that an introductory textbook is not the proper place to push our particular point of view in sociology. Rather, we have tried to give a picture of a broad consensus in the field. Wherever such consensus is lacking, we have tried, as fairly as we could, to present the divergent viewpoints and to show the implications of each, without trying to arbitrate or judge between them. Our own point of view may broadly be described as "humanistic," that is, as a conception of sociology as belonging essentially to the humanities. This conception of the field stands in the tradition of classical European (particularly German and French) sociological theory. In our case, the conception has been strongly influenced by the phenomenological approach to sociology, especially as it is found in the work of Alfred Schütz. We have elsewhere written in defense of this point of view. Here, we have tried to avoid such partisanship to the best of our ability. This is an introduction to sociology as generally understood by American sociologists, *not* an introduction to "humanistic," "phenomenological" or "Schutzian" sociology. The one place where we have deliberately introduced a Schutzian perspective (where we have done it inadvertently, we may be sure that critics will point it out) is in our discussion of the relationship of everyday social life to the institutional order. This, though, was done not with partisan intent but for the aforementioned purpose of making the sociological material "alive" for the student.

We have, separately, written two other books

with an undergraduate audience in mind. Neither of these is an introductory textbook, but we should say how, in our understanding, the present book relates to them. The first is Peter Berger, *Invitation to Sociology* (Garden City, N. Y., Doubleday-Anchor, 1963). This is an informal exposition of a "humanistic" approach to sociology. It has been widely used as supplementary reading in introductory courses and, for some, may serve the same purpose here. The other is Brigitte Berger, *Societies in Change* (New York, Basic Books, 1971). This is a textbook in comparative sociology, with special emphasis on social change. It may be consulted by those readers who are frustrated by the "ethnocentrism" of the illustrations in the present book.

While broadcasting commercials on behalf of our diversified line of literary products, we will take the liberty of mentioning yet one more book - Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday-Anchor, 1967). For better or for worse, this will give anyone who is sufficiently curious an idea of the implications for sociological theory of a Schutzian approach. However much we may want to sell our own books, we would not really recommend this one for a beginning student.

Finally, there are some personal acknowledgments to be made. Above all we want to thank William Gum, our editor at Basic Books, for his unflagging enthusiasm and encouragement during the writing of this book. We want also to thank Maria Carvainis and Loretta Li, of Basic Books, for their patience and efficiency in making various technical arrangements; James Ecks for imaginative work on the instructor's manual, Daniel Pinard for research assistance and Susan Woolfson for secretarial services that are most inadequately described by this term.

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